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Expansive river cleanup plan revealed

Restoring Hudson may cost GE more

By Dan Shapley

Poughkeepsie Journal

The public can now get its first look at a comprehensive plan to assess and restore natural resources damaged or destroyed by PCB pollution in the Hudson River -- from bald eagles and fish to water and mud.

Released Monday, the Natural Resource Damage Assessment is a plan for continuing research into resources that could have been damaged by pollution -- and then determining how to restore them.

Ultimately, General Electric Co., which discharged more than 1 million pounds of PCBs into the upper Hudson until the 1970s, would be liable for restoration costs.

Those costs have not yet been estimated, and won't be until the studies are complete years from now.

"It is a road map to assess the level of injury to the resource," said Fred Caslick, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, one of the agencies that prepared the report. "That must come first before there is any attempt to identify the loss in economic terms."

The public can comment on the plan until Nov. 1.

GE already is cooperating in a \$460 million project to dredge remaining PCB pollution from the Hudson River bottom north of Albany and south of its capacitor manufacturing plants in Fort Edward and Hudson Falls.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is responsible for studying and directing the cleanup.

A parallel process

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The Natural Resource Damage Assessment is a separate, parallel process by federal and state agencies known as the "natural resource trustees" -- the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

GE spokesman Mark Behan said the company hopes to participate in the assessment.

"We hope that they will use the best possible science and actual data from the upper Hudson and common sense," Behan said. "The river is home to thriving fish and wildlife populations and it's been well documented that the river today is cleaner and healthier than it has been in generations."

In laboratory and field studies elsewhere, polychlorinated biphenyls -- PCBs -- have been shown to hurt wildlife by damaging reproductive, endocrine and immune systems, increasing lesions and tumors, and causing death.

"It puts into perspective the vast amount of injuries that have been caused by PCB contamination," said Rich Schiafo, environmental projects manager at Scenic Hudson, a Poughkeepsie-based environmental group. "On the other hand, it is a great opportunity for communities up and down the Hudson to restore some of those lost resources."

The trustees' studies will assess any damage caused by long-term pollution to fish, waterfowl, birds, mink and otters, bats and turtles. They will also study water, sediments, air and habitat for possible damage.

Because PCBs accumulate in tissue, the pollution also threatens people, especially those who eat contaminated fish from the Hudson River. State advisories have banned or limited human consumption of fish since the mid-1970s.

Putting a dollar value on the lost use of the recreational fishery is another of the trustees' goals.

William Conners, a Pleasant Valley resident and vice president of the New York State Conservation Council, said he appreciates the urge to compensate sportsmen for any loss to fishing -- but he takes issue with quantifying the damage and holding GE liable.

"That's going to be trying to get your arms around a cloud," he said. "Calculating damages on intangible and other aspects of the Hudson are going to be extremely difficult. I'm not sure you can put a dollar value on it."

''Does that mean digging deeper into GE's pocket?'' he added. ''I don't think it should.''

John Mylod, a Poughkeepsie resident and one of the last to fish the Hudson commercially, was surprised to hear the trustees would not study the damage to the commercial fishery.

Fishing industry losses large

By some estimates, commercial fishing on the Hudson lost tens of millions dollars a year because PCB pollution restricted sale of striped bass and scared customers away from other still-legal species like shad and blue crabs.

''There's a larger impact that's probably not easy to put a dollar value on, and that is the loss to fishermen of resources, and now the loss of those fishermen, from the scene,'' Mylod said. ''Over the last 25 years, a majority of the people who fished in the commercial fishing industry have either quit or died.''

August Zahn, who is credited with continuing the tradition of fishing in Poughkeepsie, died just last week at age 95.

Caslick, of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the focus of the trustees' mission is to assess and restore public resources damaged by PCB pollution. Commercial fishing would be considered a loss to private enterprise.

While it will take years for the trustees to complete their research, the law doesn't require GE to wait for them to finish before negotiating a settlement, Caslick said.

''It's GE's call. They can begin negotiations,'' Caslick said. ''We're doing our best to put information together and give our best shot to any proposed settlement, but that's the way the law reads. They are not required to wait on us.''

Behan, GE's spokesman, said it was premature to talk about settling when the government agencies were still completing their report.

''We hope we will have an opportunity to participate in this process,'' Behan said.

While Caslick could not estimate the cost of the restoration projects, the report's executive summary states that the cost of studying the damage is expected to be less than the cost of damage to the resource.

The four government agencies have been working for more than five years on the studies.